



The Law of the Lord

In the Law of God a truly perfect standard of righteousness is given to us which, with good reason, can be called the eternal will of the Lord, for there, fully and clearly contained in two Tables, is all that he requires of us.

In the first Table, he has laid down for us, in just a few commandments, what is the service of his majesty which pleases him. In the second Table, he tells us what are the duties of charity which are due to our neighbour.

Let us listen to the Law, then, and we shall see afterwards what doctrine we ought to draw from it and, similarly, what fruit we ought to gather from it.

1. The Ten Commandments

The first table: The first commandment

I am the Lord, your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt and from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before my face.

The first part of this commandment is like a preface to the whole Law. For, when he affirms that he is *the Lord, our God*, God declares himself to be the one who has the right to command, and to whose commandment obedience is due. So it is that he says through his prophet: *'If I am a Father, where is the love (which is due to me)? If I am Lord, where is the reverential fear (which is due to me)?'* (Mal. 1:6).

In a similar way he reminds us of his blessings, making it obvious how ungrateful we are if we do not obey his voice. For it is by the same goodness through which he *rescued* the Jewish people *from the slavery* of Egypt that he also delivers all his servants from the Egypt which continues to exist, that is, from the power of sin.

His prohibition of having *other gods* means that we must not attribute anything which is proper to God to any other being at all.

And he adds *before my face*, declaring in this way that he wishes to be acknowledged as God, not just by an outward confession, but in pure truth from the depth of the heart.

Now, these are the things which are proper to God alone and which cannot be transferred to another without robbing him: that we should worship only him, that we should rely on him with our whole trust and with our whole hope, that we should acknowledge that it is from him that whatever is good and holy comes, and that we should praise him for all goodness and holiness.

The second commandment

You shall not make for yourself any image nor any resemblance of the things which are in the heaven above, or on the earth here below, or in the waters which are under the earth. You shall not bow your head to them nor shall you honour them.

Just as by the previous commandment he declared himself to be the only God, so now he states who he is and how he must be served and honoured.

He forbids, then, that we should have in mind any *resemblance* to him. He gives the reason for this in Deuteronomy 4:15-19 and in Isaiah 40:18-2.6, that is, because the Spirit is nothing like the body.

Furthermore, he forbids in religion that we should honour any *image*. So let us learn from this commandment that the service and honour of God are spiritual, for, as he is Spirit, it follows that he desires to be served and honoured in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

He then adds a terrible threat by which he declares how very seriously the transgression of this commandment offends him: *For I am the Lord, your God, powerful, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children until the third and fourth generation in those who hate me, and extending mercy to a thousand generations towards those who love me and keep my commandments.*

It is as if he were saying that he is the only one to whom we must cling and that he cannot tolerate any companion god; and even that he will avenge his majesty and his glory if anyone transfers them to images or anything else; and that not only once, but on fathers, children and nephews, that is, on all – so many as there shall be – who will imitate the ungodliness of their fathers. In the same way he is saying that he will show his mercy and kindness to those who love him and keep his Law. And he declares to us the grandeur of his mercy in that he extends it to a thousand generations, while he assigns only four generations to his vengeance.

The third commandment

You shall not take the Name of the Lord in vain, for the Lord Will not consider as innocent the person who will have taken the Name of the Lord, his God, in vain.

Here he forbids us to misuse his holy and sacred Name in oaths intended to confirm vain things or lies, because oaths must not serve our pleasure or gratification. They are to serve a just necessity, when the glory of God has to be maintained, or when it is necessary to affirm something which tends to edification.

And he absolutely forbids that we should sully his holy and sacred Name in any way at all. Rather, we must take his Name upon our lips with reverence and with all dignity, as his holiness requires. This is true whether we are taking an oath or in any other statement which contains a reference to him.

And since it is mainly by invoking it that people use this Name, let us understand what sort of invocation is commanded here.

Finally, he here announces a punishment, that those who will have profaned the holiness of his Name by the abusive use of it, and by other blasphemies, may not think that they will be able to escape from his retribution.

The fourth commandment

Remember the day of rest in order to sanctify it. You shall work six days and do all your work. The seventh day is the rest of the Lord, your God. You shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your livestock, nor the foreigner who is within your doors. For in six days God made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all the things which are in them, and on the seventh day he rested. This is why he blessed the day of rest and sanctified it.

We see that there were three reasons behind the giving of this commandment.

For *firstly*, by means of the rest of the seventh day, the Lord wished to represent to the people of Israel the spiritual rest by which believers must cease from their own works in order to let the Lord do his work in them.

Secondly, he wished that there should be established a definite day in which believers might assemble to hear his Law and engage in worshipping him.

Thirdly, he wished that a day of rest might be given to servants and to those who live under the power of others, that they might have some break in their labour. But this is rather a consequence than a principal reason.

As for the first reason, there is no doubt that it came to an end in Christ: for he is the Truth whose presence causes all figures to vanish, and he is the Reality at whose coming all shadows are abandoned. So it is that St Paul affirms that the sabbath was the shadow of a future reality (Col. 2:17). He declares the same truth elsewhere when, in Romans 6, he teaches us that we are buried with

Christ, in order that by his death we may die to the corruption of our flesh (Rom. 6:6-7). And this does not happen in one day, but throughout our life until, entirely dead to ourselves, we are filled with the life of God. Hence, Christians must have nothing to do with the superstitious observance of days.

These last two reasons cannot be numbered among the shadows of old, but belong equally to all ages. Because of this, although the sabbath is abrogated, it still happens amongst us that we agree to meet on certain days to hear the Word of God, to break the mystic bread of the Supper, and to pray publicly. For such is our weakness that it is impossible for such assemblies to take place every day of the week. It is also essential that servants and workers should be able to rest from their labour.

So it is that the day the Jews observed has been taken away (which was helpful in eliminating superstition), and another day has been set aside for this purpose (which was necessary for securing and maintaining order and peace in the Church).

The truth, then, was given to the Jews through figures, but to us it is revealed without any shadow at all:

Firstly, that in the whole of our life we might meditate on a perpetual sabbath rest from our works, so that the Lord might operate in us by his Spirit;

Secondly, that we might maintain the legitimate order of the Church in order to listen to the Word of God, to receive the Sacraments, and to pray publicly;

Thirdly, that we should not inhumanly oppress with work those who are subject to us.

The second table: the fifth commandment

Honour your father and your mother so that your days might be extended on the land which the Lord, your God, will give you.

By this commandment we are instructed to exercise piety towards our fathers and mothers and, in the same way, to those who are placed over us, such as princes and civil rulers. That is to say, that we are to show them respect, obedience and thankfulness, and to render to them every service possible. For it is the Lord's will that we should act like this to those who have given us life. And it is of little importance whether they are worthy or unworthy of this honour for, whatever they may be, they have been given to us as father and mother by the Lord, who has willed that we should honour them.

But there is something else we must notice in passing: we are not commanded to obey them except in God. So we must not transgress the Law of the Lord just to please them, for if they command us to do anything against God, on this point we must not consider them as father and mother, but as strangers who wish to pull us away from obedience to our true Father.

This fifth commandment is the first one that carries a promise, as St Paul says in Ephesians 6:2. In promising the blessing of this present life to children who will have served and honoured their fathers and mothers by an appropriate observance of this commandment, the Lord is also declaring that a curse most certainly awaits those who rebel against them and are disobedient to them.

The sixth commandment: you shall not kill

Here we are forbidden all violence and attack, and in general every offence which might wound the body of our neighbour.

For if we recall that man is made in the image of God, we must consider our neighbour to be holy and sacred, in such a way that it is impossible to abuse him without also abusing the image of God which is in him.

The seventh commandment: you shall not be dissolute

Here the Lord forbids us any kind of sexual impropriety or immodesty. For it is by the law of marriage alone that the Lord has joined man to woman, and, as this union is sealed by his authority, he has also sanctified it by his blessing. It follows that every other form of union apart from marriage is cursed before him.

Those, then, who do not have the gift of remaining chaste (a special gift which is not within everyone's power) must provide for the ungovernable appetite of their flesh by the honest remedy of marriage. For marriage is honourable among all, but God will condemn debauched people and adulterers (Heb. 13:4).

The eighth commandment: you shall not steal

Here, generally, we are forbidden and prohibited from seizing other people's goods. For the Lord wishes that his people should have nothing whatever to do with all robberies by which the weak are overwhelmed and oppressed, as well as all kinds of fraud by which the innocence of simple people is taken advantage of.

If, then, we wish to keep our hands pure, and innocent of theft, we must refrain from all forms of cunning and trickery as much as from violent robberies.

The ninth commandment: you shall not state any false evidence against your neighbour

Here the Lord condemns all evil-speaking and insults by which the good reputation of our brother is tarnished, and all lies which would cause him to be wounded in any way at all.

For since a good name is more precious than any treasure anywhere, we are no less damaged by being robbed of the integrity of our good reputation than we would be if we were stripped of our goods. And often one is as successful in carrying off a brother's goods through giving false witness, as by seizing them with one's hands.

Hence, just as the previous commandment ties the hands, so this one ties the tongue.

The tenth commandment

You shall not covet your neighbour's house and you shall not desire his wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything which belongs to him.

By these words the Lord puts, as it were, a tight rein on all our strong desires which go beyond the limits set by love for others. All the other commandments prohibit committing acts against the rule of love, but this one forbids even conceiving them in the heart.

So this commandment condemns hatred, envy and just as murder was condemned earlier. Obscene sentiment and inner impurity of heart are as much forbidden as depraved behaviour. Just as, before, graspingness and cunning were prohibited, so now is greed for riches. Where previously malicious talk was banned, so now spite itself is curbed.

We see how much this commandment is intended to be of general application, and how far and wide its extent is. For the Lord requires us to love our brothers with a marvellous affection which burns intensely like a flame. He wants this affection to be untroubled by the slightest evil desire threatening the welfare and advancement of our neighbour.

The sum and substance of this commandment, then, is that we are to be so lovingly disposed towards others that we will not be even slightly affected by any strong desire in conflict with the law of love, and that we will be both ready and very willing to give to each person what is his. And for each person we must consider this to be what the duty of our position requires us to give to him.

2. The Law Summarized

When he taught that the whole Law is contained in two articles, our Lord Jesus Christ declared to us clearly enough what is the real purpose of all the commandments of the Law.

The first article is that we should love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our strength.

The second article is that we should love our neighbour as much as we love ourselves.

And he has taken this interpretation from the Law itself, for the first part is found in Deuteronomy 6:5, and we see the other in Leviticus 19:18.

3. What Comes to Us from the Law Alone

There, then, is the standard and pattern of a holy and righteous life, and even a most perfect picture of righteousness; so that if someone expresses the Law of God in his life, he will not lack before the Lord anything of what is required of perfection.

To bear this out, God promises to those who will have carried out his Law not only the great blessings of the present life which are referred to in Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:1-14, but also the reward of eternal life (Lev. 18:5)

On the other hand, God announces the retribution of eternal death for those who will not have accomplished by their deeds all that is commanded in this Law (Deut. 28:15-68). Also Moses, having made the Law known, takes heaven and earth to witness that he has just put before the people good and evil, life and death (Deut. 30:19-20).

But although the Law shows the path to life, yet we have to see how it can benefit us. Of course, if our will were fully trained and disposed to obey God's will, just to know the Law would be more than enough to save us. As it is, however, our carnal and corrupt nature fights all the time, and in every way, against the spiritual Law of God. The teaching of this Law does not improve our nature in any way at all. So it is that this same Law (which was given for salvation if it had found hearers who were good and capable of keeping it) turns into something which results in sin and death. For since we are all convicted of being transgressors of the Law, the more clearly the Law reveals to us the righteousness of God, the more clearly, on the other hand, it uncovers our unrighteousness.

Consequently, the more the Law catches us going further into transgression, the heavier will be the judgement of God of which it finds us guilty. The promise of eternal life being removed, all that remains for us is the curse which, by the Law, falls on us all.

4. The Law Is a Step in Coming to Christ

The evidence given by the Law proves the unrighteousness and transgression of all of us. Its purpose in this, however, is not that we might fall into despair nor, being totally discouraged, that we should founder in ruin.

Admittedly, the apostle testifies that we are all condemned by the Law's judgement, so that every mouth may be closed and the entire world be found guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). However, he himself teaches elsewhere that God has imprisoned all men under the power of unbelief, not in order to ruin them or let them perish, but that he might have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32).

Having then used the Law to tell us of our weakness and impurity, the Lord comforts us through trust in his power and mercy. And it is in Christ, his Son, that he reveals himself as being benevolent and favourably disposed to us.

In the Law, God appears only as the rewarder of perfect righteousness – of which we are completely bereft – and, on the other hand, as the upright and strict Judge of sins. Yet, in Christ, his face is full of grace and gentleness, and shines on miserable, unworthy sinners. For this is the admirable display of his infinite love that he gave to us: he delivered up his own Son for us and, in him, opened to us all the treasures of his mercy and goodness.

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